

How can I drink alcohol safely?

People frequently misjudge how intoxicated they may be. It is not necessary to be falling down to impair your ability to drive or operate machinery. At times, even one glass of beer or wine can significantly impair reactions. Despite the use of alcohol at parties, picnics, restaurants and social gatherings, it is definitely not safe to drink and drive. In fact, it is the leading cause of premature death and accidental injury.

Because alcohol is a depressant, even moderate drinking interferes with a person's judgment and reaction time. This can be very dangerous when driving a motor vehicle or operating machinery, such as a motorized lawn mower, a sewing machine, a chain saw or a garbage disposal.

On the other hand, alcoholism is a progressive disease. Alcoholics may drink to avoid feelings of fear or insecurity. However, their drinking actually can create anger, guilt, shame, anxiety and other negative emotions. Friends, family members and co-workers are also affected by alcoholism. Eventually, it damages the digestive and immune systems and all the organs, especially the liver. If untreated, alcoholism can lead to death.

People may not think of drunken drivers as violent. It is usually not the drunken driver's intention to kill and maim others in an accident. Those who drink and drive may otherwise be gentle, supportive members of society. However, even with only a couple of drinks in their system, people can become a danger to the community. Blinded by false confidence and unaware of the effects of drinking, they drive unpredictably. Alcohol-related injury has declined since the early '80s, but alcohol is still a factor in 39 percent of driving fatalities.

How much is too much alcohol? It depends mostly on a person's body weight. Large people usually can tolerate more alcohol than lightweight people. Generally, a person should never drink more than one ounce of alcohol per hour; this is roughly equal to one 12-ounce beer per hour, one four-ounce glass of wine per hour or one mixed drink per hour. Drinking more than that can increase blood alcohol to an intoxicating level.

Here are some additional safety tips for those who choose to drink:

- Be sure to arrange for someone who isn't drinking alcohol to be the designated driver.
- Always sip a drink slowly.
- Don't drink on an empty stomach. Eat at least 15 minutes before the first drink. Continue to consume food while you drink.
- Carbonated water and mixers speed up alcohol's effects. Therefore, add ice or noncarbonated water to dilute an alcoholic drink.
- The only way to sober up after drinking is to wait it out. Strong black coffee, cold showers or physical exertion do nothing to reduce intoxication. Sleep it off, call a cab or ask a friend to give you a ride. You can safely retrieve your vehicle or operate a machine when you're sober.

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